WORLD CHRONICLE

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PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: Ian Chambers, Director, International Labour Organisation (ILO) Liaison Office with the United Nations (New York)

JOURNALISTS: Obi Emekekwue, News Agency of Nigeria

Elvi Ruotinnen, Gemini News Service, London

Robert Toombs, NBC TV

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION

Ian Chambers, Director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Liaison Office with the United Nations (New York), discusses the organization's efforts in improving the working conditions and the welfare of workers worldwide. Mr. Chambers emphasizes the importance of social and economic justice in the promotion of world peace and stability.

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VOICE: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

The last few years have witnessed important economic changes in many parts of the world. Centrally-planned economies have collapsed and third world countries are burdened with heavy debts, accelerated population growth, rising unemployment and low productivity. How does this affect the political stability of the world and the social and economic life of the world's working men and women?

The role of the International Labour Organisation or ILO, is to address these and other questions relating to employment worldwide. The ILO which is based in Geneva, is one of the UN's oldest specialized agencies.

Our guest today, Ian Chambers, is the Director of the New York Liaison Office of the ILO to the United Nations. Mr. Chambers, a national of Canada, will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Obi Ememkewue of the News Agency of Nigeria; Elvi Ruotinnen of Gemini News Service of London and; Robert Toombs of NBC TV.

Before we begin our discussion with Mr. Chambers, let's look at one ILO activity in addressing the issue of children working under very hazardous conditions. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports:

WHITEHOUSE: A mountain of smouldering garbage, 200 metres high. It is one of the landmarks of

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Manila, the capital of the Philippines. In a nation of intermittently natural volcanoes, this manmade pile is permanently active. It's as close to a vision of hell as you're likely to get on earth.

Tourists come here trying to catch with the camera what the eyes can hardly believe. Welcome to Smokey Mountain, perhaps the biggest dump site in the world. In an area larger than 20 hectares, more than 20,000 people live and work as scavengers. Among them are one thousand children. They are only a tiny proportion of a child labour force in the Philippines, estimated at 3 million by the International Labour Organisation.

A group of them even took their plight to the streets in Manila's May Day parade. But banning children from working is not a realistic solution, so another approach is being tried.

GUNN: "But to try and provide protection first of all for those children who are working, and then to provide alternatives for them -- a combination of educational and income-generating alternatives that make it possible for them to leave this hazardous work."

WHITEHOUSE: Smokey Mountain claims the dubious distinction of having the highest concentration of child workers anywhere. Day by day, round the clock, hundreds of children poke endlessly at the garbage. Their quick eyes and nimble hands make them good at this work.

But the toll is too high. This year, four children have died of tetanus and two were run over by bulldozers. Many suffer serious burns and respiratory diseases. And, they're preyed on by unscrupulous traders.

It's a story familiar to Manuel Malacang who was once a scavenger himself. Now he works on an ILO project to give the children of Smokey Mountain an alternative.

MALACANG: "I remember I brought my children in the dump to show them that this is not good. As of now, they ask me why I am still working in the dump, in this project. I say that it is because I don't want to have another generation -- my generation is enough."

WHITEHOUSE: In the heart of the dump, a drop-in centre, open 24 hours a day. Here, children can find food and safety. In another centre, children receive basic education and are helped with alternative income-earning activities. It's a glimpse of a brighter horizon beyond the smoke.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Chambers, despite that glimpse of a brighter horizon, the picture on the whole is rather depressing. But before we go into the problems of the employment of children, employment generally and of course, unemployment, perhaps you can tell us a little bit about ILO. I gather that it came about in part because of a reaction to the Bolshevik Revolution and it's also, I believe, unique in the United Nations system in that, in its membership, it's represented equally by governments and the private sector and within the private sector, both employers and employees. Could you

elaborate a bit on that for us?

CHAMBERS: Yes, you're correct on both counts, Mr. Littlejohns. The western powers at the time of the First World War were of course terribly alarmed at the Bolshevik Revolution, seeing it as a threat not only to international peace but to their own domestic social situation. You will remember that at the end of the 19th century there were already socialist international gatherings. There was a real question as was initially the position in the Soviet Union itself that the nation states should disappear as part of the larger triumph of the proletariat. Well of course, the nation states didn't disappear. The reaction in western Europe was that we do however have to take account of these tremendous social and economic powers that have been unleashed and in order to do that, the ILO was set up under the Treaty of Versailles in order to bring together the governments, if you like, more or less as arbiters, the large international and national trade union movements and the employers. And because of the sense of almost danger, if you like, that the governments would not be able to control the nation states, it was felt that they had to come together, these three groups I mentioned, on an equal basis. So you have the rather extraordinary, in fact, quite unique situation that you mentioned, where in the ILO the states themselves are members but they are represented not only by their governments but also by the labour unions and the private employers in the country.

LITTLEJOHNS: But don't these three elements tend to pull in different directions?

CHAMBERS: Very much so and of course, that's the whole purpose of having the ILO.

LITTLEJOHNS: How do you ever arrive at a consensus?

CHAMBERS: Sometimes with great difficulty but that in a sense is what makes the validity, we feel very strongly, of the organization in the sense that if you take a typical situation which, for example, let's take asbestos, because that was recently under discussion and it is an issue worldwide. The workers of course took the position that they should simply not have asbestos anymore and it has to be removed from those places where it is. The employers pointed out that in terms of investment, in terms of working processes and so on, this would have to be a long process and in some cases, the cost involved would simply not make it worthwhile to continue. Governments of course representing the social interest say, "we can't have buildings built anymore where people are going to breathe carcinogenic fibres". They all got together and came up with something that was both partly satisfactory to the workers in terms of increasing safety that was economically feasible and viable which is the element that the employers of course, typically defend, and with which governments as the spokesmen, if you like, or the guardians of public interest felt was a reasonable solution, both economically, politically and socially in the situation. So that's how it works. Sometimes of course, it doesn't work because you have diametrically opposed positions but then usually those are the things that are worked out beforehand so we don't have a fullblown conference that's going to fail. By the time we go into a tripartite conference, we know that at least the skeleton of a compromise situation has already been worked out.

EMEKEKWUE: Mr. Chambers, in spite of the developments that have taken place in the area of labour development, there still remains a lot of labour exploitation of workers in particular. What is the kind of mechanism that the ILO has in place for monitoring the enforcement of international standards in the workplace?

CHAMBERS: Well, as you mentioned, we do have the whole set of

international labour conventions which are multilateral treaties and which can, as for other multilateral treaties, be enforced ultimately by going to the International Court of Justice. But in effect, what these conventions amount to is an agreement amongst the various countries of the world which have ratified them to say we will establish and then enforce a particular minimum standard in labour. Now, reports have to go every year from the countries to the ILO in Geneva; there is a panel of independent legal experts who examine these. Interestingly enough, my first personal contact with the new Secretary-General was when he was a member of that panel in Geneva as one of our experts examining conventions in the area of social policy. The interesting thing again now is that the reports don't only come from governments, but also from the employers and workers in the countries so that you get a broader spectrum perhaps than you might if officialdom or bureaucracy alone were the reporters. If it's found that there is a serious problem; that the standard is not being enforced, then the ILO tries to tackle it from two sides. One is, of course, to draw the attention of the public and indeed of other countries to the fact that this is not being done but the other which I think is a more positive approach, is to say to the country: "If you're having a problem with this, can we help you? Is it a problem of drafting a law? Is it a problem of working out negotiations amongst the parties concerned so that it would help to have somebody from outside the country as a neutral person but who has expertise in the area? Is it an economic problem? Do you need development aid in this regard?" We try and take a whole range of approaches which will over time enable changes to come about and for the most part, I can say without bragging on behalf of the organization though it deserves it, but we've been pretty successful in getting these things through but as is implicit in your earlier comment, there is a tremendous amount that remains to be done.

EMEKEKWUE: So on the whole, in terms of the response of the

governments to implementing these things, how much hasn't been taking place? Have governments on a whole been more amenable to taking the corrections done your way?

CHAMBERS: Of course it's difficult to quantify but I think the important factor is that we have seen everywhere that if there is the political will to make a change, if there is the political will to improve, then usually it can be done. The fundamental question is not financing, it's not even the difficulty of labour relations in the country or the fear of discouraging investment. It's really just a political will on the part of course not only of governments but of the non-governmental partners to try and work towards a change and there we have seen very much in relation to the attitudes of private capital, investors, managers, employers, and certainly on the part of governments of course all the more responsive to workers as they become more democratic, that there is significant improvement.

RUOTINNEN: Mr. Chambers, I have to go back to the film that we saw about the children of the garbage heaps of the Third World. That, with the population increase, is apparently getting to a worse situation. In Latin America, Africa, it's the same. And there's lots for you and everybody to do. But is there one practice at least victimizing the children that we hear less about lately? Has ILO been involved in stopping the blindness caused by the rug weaving -- the 10-year-old children in the countries which make Oriental rugs, making the very fine stitches, lose their sight for life and indeed, those of us in our affluent homes walk on these lovely, lovely artwork....

LITTLEJOHNS: Has ILO been dealing with that, Mr. Chambers?

CHAMBERS: Yes, we have actually over a number of years and in framing the question of course, Miss Ruotinnen has touched on a

number of issues that are very relevant that, on the one hand, clearly we feel strongly in the ILO -- and our sister organizations such as UNICEF, UNDP and so on -- that these are practices that have to be stopped because of the tremendous toll they take on the children and their future lives if indeed they have future lives. On the other, we have to be conscious of the economic realities that clearly, if everyone in the family is going to starve, then this is not either going to be a solution. Blindness as against death is a very hard choice to make.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is this blindness from close work or is it from the fibres that get into their eyes? How do they become blind?

CHAMBERS: In terms of the pathological cause, it is largely a question of working on very fine work in poor light. This was something for example, that came to light in Van Gogh's pictures of the lace workers in Belgium a century ago, and is very similar to the situation which these children face now. Children of course are used because of the fineness of their fingers for the stitching. But I think you've touched also on another important factor when you say "we in the more affluent countries walk on these carpets". Just as we've seen in the ecological sphere in terms of seals for example -- furs in general -- perhaps if consumers were more conscious of it, not in the sense of cutting out the only possible livelihood but in the sense of saying we will pay a little more if we know that this has been done under better conditions or just to express their concern in this regard. That indeed would be a very powerful mechanism too. It can't only be done by technical co-operation.

RUOTINNEN: The child labour laws here in the United States -- we have the National Child Labour Organization which has helped to get legislation for 80 years now and certainly that's true about Nordic countries. At what stage is child labour law development

and enforcement in many of the developing countries?

LITTLEJOHNS: How are the child labour laws enforced?

CHAMBERS: Well, one, there are usually but not always, child labour laws on the books but the question is indeed the one you mentioned -- its enforcement. When you keep in mind the enormous size of the problem, the enormous size of the population in many developing countries and the fact that you may have 10, 11, 12 labour inspectors underpaid with great difficulties of transport. We have many projects where the labour inspectors say, "please, if you could just get bicycles for us, we could do our jobs so much better". That sets the context, if you like, of the problem of enforcing this type of legislation which is why I mentioned earlier that public opinion can play a tremendous role because as long as it is possible to get away with it, as long as it's really felt that this is, as we used to say in China: heaven is high and the Emperor is far away, then these things are not really going to be enforced effectively through a legal mechanism. It has to be much more the social sense that this is not acceptable and that we all share the blame if it continues. That being said, of course, we do try in the ILO specifically to improve the capacity of labour inspectors, to improve their means of getting about, of testing, of enforcing the laws for which they are responsible. But in the end, this has to rest with the governments themselves and therefore with the societies to provide the means and therefore attach the importance that this question like child labour and many others deserve.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE**. Our guest is Ian Chambers, Director of the New York Liaison Office of the International Labour Organisation to the United Nations.

TOOMBS: The United Nations Charter says nothing authorizes

the UN to intervene in matters which are essentially in the domestic jurisdiction of any state. But the ILO seems to improve working and living conditions and promote human rights. That implies intervention, doesn't it, in internal affairs?

CHAMBERS: Absolutely, we are unashamedly interventionist. We were fortunate from that point of view in having, as I mentioned at the beginning of the programme, our Constitution stemming from 1919 when there was a very strong internationalist move and there is nothing in our Constitution that prevents us from being very interventionist from that point of view. Once a country has ratified an ILO Convention or if it asks for our help or even if it doesn't, there are quite a number of things that we can do. Of course again, because we work not only with governments but with the unions and the employers in the countries, that we can undertake to try and work towards change and development in those countries in relation to labour and employment.

TOOMBS: Considering the apparent collapse of Marxism and recalling that the ILO Constitution says poverty everywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere, how do you respond to critics who say that implies a neo-socialism?

CHAMBERS: Well, if I were to have to respond, I guess if that's the way you're putting it -- two things -- first, Marxism in terms of an applied political system is certainly having a tough time but I don't think that any thinking person would say now that there has not been a contribution to world thought that has come about, if you like, in a reaction to, if not necessarily in agreement with, many of the theoretical and political positions that Marxism stood for. The solidarity of people internationally, the necessity for society to work, that the rich share with the poor, I don't think that these ideas which tend to be identified with Marxism because it was the strongest expression of them, but

I don't think they've gone out of style or if they have, then we should be very upset about it and in fact we are upset in the ILO that much of the language which is being used in international politics about private sector, about the private enterprises if this was going to solve all the world's problems. Clearly it's not so we have to find a balance between communism that hasn't worked, private capitalism that may work efficiently economically but gives rise to social problems as we saw in the Soviet Union or Russia in 1917 itself. Now, the fact that's contained in the statement which you quoted from the ILO Constitution, to me more succinctly than in any other international instrument, talks to the question of the North-South difference. The poverty of the South that is increasing measured against the prosperity of the North that is increasing is not creating conditions for universal and lasting peace and if we don't address that credibly in the United Nations, in the Bretton Woods institutions and in all other international fora, then we are in for a very difficult century ahead of us.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Chambers, in a memorandum for this programme, you said if the ILO is right, then social justice should be the central preoccupation of governments both nationally and internationally but there's little evidence that this is the case. Are you saying that there are an awful lot of bad apple governments out there? And what is ILO doing to redress that situation?

CHAMBERS: I'm not sure that it's a question of bad-apple or good-apple governments though governments of course have a very important role to play but at least with the increasing triumph, as it is usually termed, of democracy, the governments are representing more and more what their societies want. The question for me is really, what do the societies want?

LITTLEJOHNS: The societies want social justice surely, don't they?

CHAMBERS: Well, they might want social justice within their own countries although election results recently in industrialized countries might call that into doubt, without mentioning any names, but the real question is, do societies in the North want social justice worldwide? Are we prepared in the North to make the sacrifices as consumers, as taxpayers that will be necessary in order to more fairly distribute the wealth of the world and that's what I don't see too many signs of for the moment. As long as it's to the level of principle, that's fine, but when it hits the pocket book, then the difficulties begin to arise.

EMEKEKWUE: Mr. Chambers, one of the approaches of the ILO to its job has been towards technical co-operation with various governments. What is the scope of these co-operation programmes and what kind of input do the governments make to them?

CHAMBERS: There has been a tremendous development in the way that we've looked at technical co-operation particularly over the last 20 or 25 years. Initially of course, it was in, what one might call, bread-and-butter issues, vocational training clearly, a little bit of manpower planning, a lot in the area of occupational safety and health, how to make factories safer and how to make workplaces safer -- this type of thing. Traditionally also, the ILO has been involved in setting up social security programmes throughout the world but it has developed much more perhaps in relation to governments' own control over its planning process, to deal with things like long-range projections and interventions, to make better use of human resources in the country, to have manpower planning systems that are tied in with educational systems. You and I both from ex-colonial countries know how irrelevant in many ways the education system was to the needs of the labour market. These are the things that we're trying to correct now as well as to concentrate much more on productivity.

If we don't have a productive economy, then there is less to distribute and therefore the inherent factors against distribution are going to be stronger. So those are the issues that are very much in the forefront of our technical co-operation programme at the moment.

RUOTINNEN: The Third World debt is quite a factor, of course, in the general conditions in the developing countries. In this background note which you wrote, I understand, you say rather movingly: "there's joy in the hearts of the western capitals as peoples throughout the world embrace democracy, but a noticeable hardening of these joyful hearts when the same people choose democratically to eat rather than to transfer the fruits of their national production to the banks of the former colonial powers. More money was lost on international stock markets in a single day in 1989 than the amount of the entire Third World debt. The stock market survived but hundreds of thousands of human beings have not".

LITTLEJOHNS: What's your response to that?

CHAMBERS: Well, having written it, I think it's superb prose but apart from that, what I'm trying to draw attention to there -- because I think it does not get sufficient attention -- is the fact that in relation to the debt issue or in relation to, if you like, a parallel debate on the use and the amount of external development aid, we are talking about money and money is essentially paper and money can lose value and gain value in a single day in phenomenal amounts. It is not as if we're talking about sums of money that have to be diverted from elsewhere. It is not as if the hospital in the northern city has to be closed in order to feed somebody in a southern village. It is again a question of political will of where we're going to put our priorities and if our priorities were to distribute world wealth in a more equitable fashion, which of

course would not solve anything either. There are a lot of sub-issues there but at least it's a start. Then it's most unlikely that the whole world financial system would tumble, crumble or fall apart. I think we might all just survive as we survived the Stock Market crash so it's an attempt to put it into perspective to say for the moment so often and I think this is as much in the press as in the public mind as in government policy, the economic agenda is the important one that's in the forefront.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Chambers, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

Our guest has been Ian Chambers, Director of the New York Liaison Office of the International Labour Organisation to the United Nations.

He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Obi Emekekwue of the News Agency of Nigeria; Elvi Ruotinnen of Gemini News Service of London and; Robert Toombs of NBC TV.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

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